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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 005258

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/12/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: JHON PINCHAO'S ESCAPE FROM FARC CAPTIVITY

REF: A. BOGOTA 3651
[B](#). BOGOTA 311
[C](#). BOGOTA 1224

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor David M. Zimov
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#). (C) Police subintendente Jhon Frank Pinchao successfully fled eight and a half years of FARC captivity in late April 2007 (ref A), four months after Fernando Araujo escaped from a separate rebel front (ref B, C). Unlike Araujo, who escaped during a military operation, Pinchao relied on long-time planning to seize an opportunity. In debriefings with Embassy personnel recovery officers, Pinchao described the factors behind his escape: camp layout and security, guards' behavior, daily FARC activities and distractions, and marches among camps. Pinchao said only the local FARC commander could order his death -- and only in the event of a Colombian military assault. End Summary.

CAMP: Layout and Security

[2](#). (C) Pinchao was one of 13 hostages, including three American citizens, held by 40-50 FARC members, nearly half of them female. The captives were grouped together in one area, allocated sleeping alcoves two by two, about 100 yards apart from the main camp. Pinchao was separated for two years from the Americans, but he said those three had always been kept together. They were guarded by four sentries, three at fixed points and one mobile, 10-15 feet from where prisoners slept, on two-hour shifts. Hostages were restricted to their area only by poles indicating lines they must not cross. Pinchao said the hostages thought the military must be familiar with camp configurations and hostage locations based on reports from escapees and deserters.

[3](#). (C) The main camp was protected by additional sentries at fixed strategic outlooks. Scouts left the camp some mornings on reconnoiters of 60-90 minutes. Pinchao did not know what means they used to signal danger and never witnessed an alert. Pinchao said there were no animals in the camp for detection or protection, nor any electronic alarms or trip wires. He heard the FARC had planted mines, but he never saw this firsthand. At the time of Pinchao's escape his captors had occupied a camp for about three months, with enough

permanence for them to collect sand for a volleyball court.

GUARDS: Gaining Their Trust, Slipping Their Chains

14. (C) Cultivating the trust of his guards was crucial to Pinchao's plans for a joint escape with fellow hostages Ingrid Betancourt and Luis Eduardo Perez. Newly assigned sentries would be alert and "ready to shoot," said Pinchao, but "one would work on them to lower the tension," and over time they would become bored and relaxed. They rewarded his good behavior with cigarettes, which he then used in exchange for provisions for his escape. Pinchao guarded these extra dry rations in preparation for escape. The three plotters predicted they would need enough food to survive 45 days in the wilderness.

15. (C) Hostages were chained at night, from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., initially by their ankles until they complained of difficulty putting on their boots, after which they were chained by the wrists. To sleep more comfortably, and to practice for escape, the captives learned to slip their shackles at night with soap or deodorant, putting them back on in the morning before guard checks. On one occasion, Pinchao was imprisoned by barbed wire, preventing him from joining Betancourt and Perez on an escape attempt. Guards sometimes fell asleep on watch, but they risked severe sanctions for doing so. In the main camp a sentry was also tasked with checking on fellow members -- that all boots were visible, meaning no one had deserted. Betancourt disguised one escape attempt by putting someone else's boots in place of her own.

DAILY ROUTINES: Moments of Opportunity

16. (C) Prisoners were never mistreated, although their activities were severely limited. Pinchao began his days at 5:00 a.m. listening to radio broadcasts of messages from hostage family members. The daily schedule revolved mainly around food: 6:00 breakfast, 9:00 snack, 12:00 lunch, 3:00 p.m. snack, 6:00 p.m. dinner, and after dinner getting ready for bed, with the guards putting on their chains. Between meals captives sought diversions like sewing, reading, handicrafts, or exercise. Pinchao was fond of sketching, so his captors gave him a student's notebook -- that happened to have Colombian GPS coordinates on the inside and instructions for making an amateur compass. Betancourt remembered how to build compasses from her physics class, and together they made five to guide their escape. The hostages were taken to the river together to bathe daily, and Betancourt taught Pinchao to swim. Prisoners were not severely punished, even for trying to escape: after their recent failed attempt, Betancourt and Perez were only chained for 24 hours, and their boots were confiscated forcing them to walk barefoot.

17. (C) Certain activities were attended by all FARC members, minus 10 guards on duty. At 4:00 each afternoon the FARC commander reviewed troops and equipment and dispensed ideological training. Wednesday and Sunday evenings from 6:00 to 8:00 were "cultural hours" when FARC members sang songs, read poetry, and performed plays. Initially the hostages joined in the cultural hours to ingratiate themselves with their captors. One December they joined in the dancing, seeking opportunities to flee. After two military prisoners escaped, the others were barred from further participation. Pinchao noted that during these social events the FARC put weapons aside and were vulnerable to surprise attacks. They were also less alert to noise because of the singing and music. Pinchao never saw his captors drink alcohol. Cultural occasions were suspended when the military was conducting operations in the area.

MARCHES: Moving by Land and River

18. (C) In moving from camp to camp, the group was led by an advance of six or eight FARC armed with AK-47's, five or ten minutes ahead, followed by guards paired with hostages, and a rear guard. The scouts used radios, with their own systems of alphanumeric codes, and handheld GPS units in which they had recorded camp coordinates. Most of the FARC dressed the same as the hostages in t-shirts, sweat pants, and raincoats. The Americans, who were larger than the others, had trouble finding clothes that fit. Betancourt dressed in camouflage and a wide-brimmed hat to avoid sunburn. The prisoners' main distinguishing feature was that they were unarmed. Captives were chained in pairs to their guards. Chains were sometimes removed when the group was under pressure to move quickly, such as when a plane flew over and they made a running dash into the hills. Even then, each hostage knew which guerrilla was responsible for him or her and was told to stay well within that person's control.

19. (C) On marches of up to 20 days, each FARC member carried 18 pounds of food. Hostages were initially tasked with carrying five to ten pounds, but this ended when they complained it was the FARC's duty to provide for prisoners. No animals were used for transport; Pinchao joked that the FARC were their own beasts of burden. The FARC hunted while on the march, except when ongoing military operations obliged them to avoid gunfire. Only once on an especially long march did the group fall short of food supplies. Anyone too ill to walk was carried by hammock. Betancourt was transported this way during a bout of hepatitis until she recovered. The unit had no real doctors, only amateurs who had taken nursing courses and prescribed treatments from memory or experience. Some moves were on foot overland, others by river in two 22-foot motorized boats, the latter usually at night and often by moonlight without lanterns. The FARC would change camps if a prisoner escaped and was not found within five days.

TROOPS: Can Kill Captives Only on Command

110. (C) From his police background Pinchao rated FARC skills "minimal," but he said the rigors of FARC life made them tough. Pinchao said, "We have seen kids grow up in the FARC. They are kids, but as a function of being in the field they have acquired skills even beyond ours (in the police)." Pinchao said the FARC were not bothered by military ground operations; he said they would merely pass the Army to one side and head in another direction. They were alarmed by planes overhead, however, when all would hold still and stick close to trees. The hostages speculated the FARC had infiltrated the Colombian Air Force or had spies at military air fields to tip off guerrilla commanders of pending overflights. They heard and saw planes only on days they were defensively situated, not on days they were moving in the open and vulnerable.

111. (C) Guards could only kill a hostage based on a direct order from the camp commander, or when under attack by the Colombian military. Guards were explicitly instructed that their duty was to keep the hostages alive. Pinchao felt that even if a captive tried to flee during a march, the FARC would not shoot but would simply search the area and capture the runaway. Hostages would only be killed if a military helicopter were descending with troops actively firing at the FARC. "They said: the guerrilla's mission is to keep you alive. But they won't allow us to be taken away alive.... If (the military) comes to pull us out,... they kill us." Drucker